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THE OUTLAW.

BY JOHN RUSSELL.

I know not, I ask not if guilt is in that heart,
I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art.

More.

Whether the wild scenes of a frontier life have a tendency to excite a spirit of lawless adventure, or whether a defective administration of justice enticed thither the outcasts of other communities, certain it is, that in the early settlement of the western states, each in succession was infested by marauders quite as depraved and reckless as ever brandished a stiletto, or handled a carbine in the mountain passes of Italy. When a robbery or murder was committed by these desperadoes, the settlers collected *en masse*, under the name of "Regulators," to inflict summary punishment. Frequently the gang, when hotly pursued, retreated to one of the caves in the bluffs that border upon our western rivers, and there defended themselves to the last extremity. Quarter they neither asked nor received. When any of the brigands were captured, they were immediately shot, or suspended from the branches of the nearest tree.

Long after Kentucky and Ohio ceased to be frontier states, and the strong arm of the law rendered hopeless any attempt at plunder, these banditti reappeared on the banks of the Illinois, committing their accustomed depredations upon the few and feeble settlements of that frontier.

The last robbery committed in this region by an organized band, occurred in the spring of 1818, and gave rise to an event of thrilling interest.

Clifton is situated on the east side of the Illinois, at the base of a high range of bluffs, about forty miles above the confluence of that river with the Mississippi. This settlement derived its name from Major Clifton, an English gentleman of great wealth, who emigrated to the United States in 1816, and settled at this place. His family consisted of daughter of fifteen, a son much younger, and eight or ten servants and laborers. Several mechanics, with their wives and children, accompanied him from England. At that period, this region was uninhabited, and the land had not been offered for sale. To obviate the latter inconvenience, Major Clifton purchased a large amount of what is still known as "floating claims," ready to "locate" them on the tract he had selected, whenever it should come into market. The building he erected, the extensive agricultural and other improvements that he planned; but more than all, the exaggerated reports of his wealth and liberality, drew thither emigrants from all quarters. In two years nearly a hundred families had settled within five miles of his residence.

Early in May, 1818, a gang of villains who had long been prowling about the vicinity, taking advantage of a dark and stormy night, stole many of the horses of the settlers, and fled. The robbers failed not to levy their tribute of "black mail" rather heavily upon Major Clifton. A horse of great value which he had imported from England was among the missing. The loss of this animal aroused his ire more than twice the amount in any other kind of property would have done, for he was excessively vain of the animal, and conscious that more than one of the neighbors would secretly rejoice at his disappointment.

At an early hour in the morning the news of the robbery was known throughout the settlement, and the citizens soon after assembled at Major Clifton's to consult upon the measures they should adopt. Their deliberations were brief. Waiting only to partake of a hastily provided breakfast, Major Clifton, breathing threats of vengeance, mounted a horse and put himself at the head of a well armed band of his neighbors. In an hour they discovered the trail of the horses, and rapidly pursued it to the ferry on the Illinois. Here they found, to their mortification, that the robbers had crossed the river undiscovered, and then, to delay pursuit, sunk the boat. No other boat could be procured within the distance of thirty miles. From the appearance of the trail, the robbery was committed in the early part of the night, as the tracks of the horses were partly obliterated by the heavy rain that had subsequently fallen. Farther attempts to overtake them were regarded as hopeless, and the settlers bent their way homeward, more indignant at having been foiled of their meditated revenge, than at the loss of their property. With their passion thus excited, the current of their vengeance was easily turned upon a new object.

About two months before, a young Virginian, of prepossessing manners, arrived in the settlement and took lodgings at an humble cabin about five miles from Major Clifton's. On his arrival he spoke of remaining but a single day, yet, without as-

signing any reason for the change in his determination, lingered there, week after week. The family where he lodged was quite willing that he should remain there any length of time he might please to stay. He paid liberally for his board—more than twice as much as they demanded, and always in advance. His gentlemanly deportment, the cheerfulness with which he accommodated himself to their humble condition, his anxiety to avoid giving unnecessary trouble, excited in the minds of the whole family a warm interest in his favor. Since his arrival, his manners, in some respects, had undergone a striking change. His countenance indicated a heart ill at ease. It was evident that his thoughts were distant from the objects before him. His steps were troubled, and hours were daily passed in solitude.

It could not be expected that a stranger of genteel address, who rode an elegant horse, wore a gold watch, and was profusely supplied with cash, could remain for two months in a frontier settlement, without any extensible business, and not excite suspicions to his disadvantage. Young Elwood was not ignorant of the rumors that were abroad, but disregarded them. Attempts were made, sometimes by direct, but more frequently by artful questions, to draw from him the object of his long sojourn in the settlement. When the interrogator was a simple honest hearted fellow, who was influenced only by insatiable curiosity, Elwood, with an air of profound mystery, took him aside, and under the promise of inviolable secrecy, gravely whispered into his ear a story so ludicrous and improbable, that when repeated, as it always was, the poor fellow who enacted the part of Paul Pry, was known to have been egregiously quizzed. To questioners of a different class he replied only with a look of indignant contempt. This course, in a short time effectually secured him from any further annoyance of that kind, but his unwillingness to disclose the nature of his business confirmed the suspicions that already existed. All this, however, made but a faint and momentary impression upon the mind of Elwood. He read, wrote, and took his solitary walks, forgetful that any dark suspicions rested upon his character.

With the people of the settlement he avoided, as much as possible, all intercourse. Once only he called upon Major Clifton, with the intention of cultivating his acquaintance, but was received in a manner so haughty and repulsive that he felt no inclination to renew the attempt.

This was the young man about whom the "Regulators" now held a consultation. Many circumstances conspired to fasten upon him the suspicion of being connected with the robbery. He had appointed that very day for his departure, and made every preparation for that purpose. A laborer of Major Clifton's of the name of Martin, who formed one of the party that pursued the robbers, now recollected that he had seen Elwood on the night of the robbery lurking near the dwelling of his employer. These facts, and many others that were adduced, removed every doubt of his guilt. The evidence against him was at least sufficient to decide his fate. It was unanimously resolved to arraign him, on the afternoon of that day, before a tribunal of Regulators, and it hardly need be added, that his immediate execution was to follow his conviction. Major Clifton volunteered his services to apprehend him.

When the news of the robbery reached Mr. Fell, the man at whose house Elwood lodged, he foresaw at once the imminent danger in which his young boarder would be placed, and advised him to flee instantly. To his astonishment, although Elwood had appointed that very morning for his departure, he declared his intention of remaining while a shade of suspicion rested upon him. Fell earnestly entreated him not to brave the vengeance of an exasperated band of "Regulators," who would not fail of connecting him with the robbery. He replied with energy, that nothing could induce him to flee and thus confirm suspicions so fatal to his reputation; that whatever might be the consequences of his continuing in the settlement, he would meet them.

Finding his entreaties of no avail, Mr. Fell left him and joined the party that assembled that morning at the house of Major Clifton.

When the Regulators had separated, Major Clifton, accompanied by Martin, rode leisurely homeward, with the intention of procuring the aid of one of his servants, and then of proceeding to Fell's for the purpose of capturing Elwood, and bringing him a prisoner to his own house, there to undergo the formality of a trial. As they rode slowly along, Martin commented laconically upon the events of the day, to which Major Clifton occasionally replied gruffly, that indicated how lit-

tle satisfactory to him was the escape of the robbers. About a mile from Clifton's, at a point where the road from the highlands to the prairie, passed through a narrow ravine of the bluff, they suddenly encountered Elwood. This meeting was unexpected, and both parties reined up their horses and for a moment gazed at each other in silence. Major Clifton, recovering from his surprise at this sudden encounter, poured out upon Elwood a torrent of invective, and ordered him to surrender. The young man calmly replied, that he was not only willing to make any explanation to Major Clifton alone, but was even then on the way to his house, for the purpose of laying before him letters and other papers that would convince the most incredulous that his character was above reproach, and his family of the first respectability, but would never be taken alive before a self-constituted tribunal of Regulators. "Surrender instantly, you villain, or I will shoot you," was the reply of Clifton. This threat, uttered in a loud and vehement tone, aroused, at once, the spirit of Elwood. "Till that moment he had been calm and forbearing in his language and demeanor. His countenance was now flushed. 'Major Clifton,' said he, 'nothing can provoke me to offer either insult or injury to you, but if that cowardly slave of yours, who is striving to earn your favor by playing the braggart, dares but to raise a weapon against me as he threatens, I shall effectually convince you both that I knew well how to defend myself.' No sooner were these words uttered than Clifton, stung to the quick at being treated with what he regarded as affected and insulting forbearance, elevated his rifle and fired. Elwood, who held the reins of his horse in his left hand, suddenly dropped them. Clifton's shot had taken effect in his left arm, which now hung powerless and broken by his side. At the sound of his rifle the Major's horse gave a sudden spring and threw his rider. In a moment Major Clifton was again upon his feet, calling loudly upon Martin to fire. The latter was preparing to obey, and had already raised his rifle to his shoulder, when Elwood drew a pistol, and hardly had the sun gleamed upon the bright barrel, before Martin fell. The ball passed through his head, and he ceased to breathe almost instantaneously. 'The blood of this man is upon your own head, Major Clifton, and not upon mine,' saying this, Elwood put spurs to his horse and left him.

When the excitement of the contest was over, this unfortunate young man saw clearly the abyss into which he was plunged. The whole country would be shortly in pursuit of him. With his arm broken and bleeding, his capture was inevitable, and death and ignominy equally certain. Despairing of escape, thoughts of suicide came over him, but the love of life soon returned, and inspired him with a determination to exert every faculty of body and mind to avoid the fate that awaited him. Stopping his horse at a lonely spot near the bluff, he dismounted, took off his saddle and bridle, and turned him loose, saying, "go, poor Selim, you at least have been a true and faithful friend to me." This spirited but affectionate animal followed his master several rods, and rubbing his head gently against him, invited Elwood to bestow upon him the caresses he had long been accustomed to receive.

This proof of affection from a brute, when every human being seemed leagued against him, affected Elwood even to tears.

Major Clifton arrived at home, burning with wrath, and in an hour his own version of the rencontre and the death of Martin, had down through the settlement. In the language of the west, "the frontier was up." The excitement was fearfully great, and it hardly needed the offer of a reward, by Major Clifton, of five hundred dollars for Elwood or his head, to give it intensity. Long before night, more than a hundred men were in search of the wounded Outlaw. For two days the pursuit was incessant. Every place that could afford concealment was repeatedly visited. A night watch was stationed on the prairie, and at every accessible point of the bluff. To the disappointment and mortification of the settlers, not the slightest trace of the fugitive was discovered. His horse was seen grazing upon the prairie, and repeated attempts were made to take him, but the noble animal, so gentle to his master, would suffer no one else to approach near him. The belief now prevailed that he had escaped by descending the Illinois, and the fact that a skiff had disappeared from the ferry on the night after the encounter, confirmed it beyond a doubt. Farther pursuit was abandoned, and the settlers resumed their accustomed avocations.

On the afternoon of the third day, Catharine Clifton was indulging in her fa-

vorite amusement of riding over the prairie. Every thing around breathed of spring, and she was tempted to extend her ramble much farther than usual. When she observed a cluster of flowers of uncommon beauty, she would spring to the ground, gather them, and deck the head of her pony, or twine them in her own dark ringlets. The carols of the mocking bird, whose songs she frequently interrupted, were less joyous than the strains of melody that gushed from her very heart as she bounded over the verdant plain.

She had strayed more than three miles from home, when suddenly a young man rose up directly before her from a clump of dry grass that had effectually concealed him. At this unexpected apparition, Miss Clifton uttered a wild scream, and for a moment terror deprived her of the power of flight. It was the young Outlaw upon whose head a price was set by her father. His broken arm hung in a sling, his clothes were stained with blood, and want and suffering were depicted on his pallid and haggard countenance. "Miss Clifton, be not alarmed," said he, "I am a wronged and persecuted man, but I am incapable of injuring a human being, even in thought. You have discovered my place of concealment, and all further attempts to escape are hopeless. I will go immediately and surrender myself to your father. I know well the consequences of falling into his power. Before this day's sun has set I shall be hung, and then thrown into my grave like a dead dog. But I will go. It will cheer me even in my last moments, when every eye is turned upon me in hate, to know that you, and not the remorseless ruffians who have pursued me, discovered my place of concealment." The respectful, but earnest, thrilling tone in which this was uttered; the deadly paleness of his lofty forehead, and still more the consciousness that the life of the young Outlaw was in her power, awakened in her heart the deepest emotions. Unwilling to betray the interest he had excited in her bosom, she affected a severity of manner little in accordance with her real feelings. "My father is a stern man," replied she, "but not unjust. If you are indeed innocent, as you pretend; if you are not leagued with the robbers, why did you remain so long in the settlement without being able to assign any motive for your stay; and why, above all, were you seen, on the night of the robbery, lurking near my father's house?" Elwood heard these formidable charges with a painful conviction that any attempt to vindicate himself would be unavailing. A deeper shade of melancholy came over his pale features, and he would cheerfully have given even life itself, to have been able to convince the fair being before him, that he was innocent. A powerful conflict was evidently going on in the mind of the Outlaw, and Miss Clifton became agitated with vague and indefinite fears for her own safety, notwithstanding the characters of honor and truth so legibly written on his manly forehead. Elwood saw the unfavorable impression which his agitation of mind had made, and instantly resolved that he would explain to her, frankly, and without concealment, the mystery in which his conduct was involved. With a powerful but vain effort to control his emotions, he addressed her: "Miss Clifton, listen to me while I disclose to you the secret of my long residence here: Neither the fear of death nor the deep obloquy that will forever rest upon my memory, could have wrung from me this fatal secret. I had resolved that it should perish with me, but this unexpected interview has shaken my resolution. I cannot endure the thought that when I am sleeping in the grave to which in a few hours I shall be consigned, you too should deem me the villain I am represented to be. Listen to my disclosure. I came to this settlement with the intention of remaining only one day, but that day changed the whole current of my existence.—You, Miss Clifton, may have forgotten your accidental visit at Fell's, our introduction and brief interview, but your looks, your air and manner, your every word, is indelibly traced upon my memory. From that hour I seemed to have lost the power of volition. I was unable to tear myself away from a place that contained all that rendered life endurable. Beyond the settlement of Clifton the world was to me a cheerless waste. At length I called upon your father for the purpose of placing in his hands letters of introduction that would convince him of my own respectability and the high standing in society of the family to which I belong. I sought his acquaintance with the intention of asking him for your hand. I need not tell you with what insulting haughtiness my first and only attempt to form an acquaintance with him was repulsed. My fondest hopes were crushed, yet I still lingered in the settlement, promising my-

self every day that on the morrow I would depart; yet when the morrow came, I wanted resolution to return again to a world where existence would be aimless, hopeless. The morning after the robbery I had appointed for my final departure, and made every arrangement for that purpose. At evening I lingered, for hours, near your dwelling, with the hope that I might gaze upon you once more before I left the settlement forever."

Such was the explanation of Elwood, every word of which traced itself in burning characters upon her heart. Her face became deadly pale and she scarcely breathed. Elwood placed in her hand an attestation of his character from a distinguished Virginian whose name is known and respected by every American. She received the open paper mechanically and gazed intently upon the writing, but the words made not the slightest impression upon her mind. Every thought, every faculty of her soul was absorbed in the single idea, that she was loved, devotedly, madly loved by the pale and interesting young Outlaw who for her had perilled honor and life. The voice of Elwood awoke her to consciousness. Raising her eyes from the paper she gazed upon the pale emaciated countenance of Elwood and burst into tears. She wept aloud and made no effort to restrain her emotions.

At an early age, death had deprived Miss Clifton of the guardian care of a mother. Such a loss is ever an irreparable one to a daughter. To Catharine it was no ordinary calamity. Her father was indeed proud of his only daughter as he was of every thing else that belonged to him, and as far as his stern nature would permit, affectionate, yet he knew little how to enter into the feelings of a warm-hearted girl, or win her confidence.

With the servants of the family, or the illiterate girls of the settlement, she could feel no companionship; and having none with whom she could share her thoughts and affections, much of her time was passed in comparative solitude, either in her father's library—in tending her flowers and shrubbery, or in rambling alone among the wild and romantic scenery of the neighborhood. She resembled one of those ideal forms of loveliness that visited the waking dreams of Tasso, and might well have inspired the exclamation of the enraptured bard:

Your shape, your motion and your mind
Are such as are of angels seen.

Her air and manner were those of joyousness and guileless innocence, but in the volume of her dark blue eye might be read of a heart untroubled, but whose love when once awakened, would be ardent, passionate, devoted, and bear upon it the seal of sternity.

Such was Catharine Clifton, hardly yet seventeen, as she listened to the confession of the young Outlaw. She had seen him at Fell's and subsequently at her father's, but his appearance and manners made only a faint impression upon her mind. She had nearly forgotten him, when the robbery and death of Martin by his hand made him the subject of engrossing interest to the whole settlement.

The story of her father left not a doubt in her mind of the guilt of Elwood, yet she secretly rejoiced that he had escaped the meditated vengeance of the Regulators. Little did she dream that she, herself would discover the place of his concealment, and, least of all that she should listen to the impassioned, thrilling confession which she had just heard. Unaware of the nature of the emotions that agitated the bosom of the weeping girl, and ascribing them to her convictions of his guilt, and fears for her own safety, Elwood mildly, but firmly repeated his intention of surrendering himself immediately to her father. Miss Clifton answered him with a look of reproach that left him in no doubt of the powerful sympathy his confession had awakened. With a trembling voice she promised to conceal in her own bosom that she had discovered the place of his concealment, and urged him to fly, instantly, and return again to his distant home. "Escape is impossible," replied Elwood. "Wounded, perishing, beset on every side by those who seek my life, not a chance of escape is left me. Even could I succeed in eluding the watchful vigilance of my enemies, existence would be but a lingering death if bereft of you. No, I had rather meet my fate at once." A moment's reflection convinced Miss Clifton that flight offered no hope to Elwood. Weak from the loss of blood, and having tasted no food for the last three days, immediate relief alone could save him from perishing.

In one of her lonely rambles along the range of hills immediately behind the perpendicular wall of rock that forms the bluff, she had discovered the entrance of a cavern, effectually concealed by a thick growth of underwood. Following the

obscure and narrow entrance of this cave, she found that after winding along for some rods, it expanded into a spacious room, and then terminated in an opening at an inaccessible height on the face of the bluff. With her head averted and crimsoned with blushes, she informed the young Outlaw of this cavern, and proposed that he should remain in his present retreat till a late hour at night and then repair to a well known tree near her father's house, when, she would meet him, and conduct him to the cave, where he would be secure. Without waiting for his reply, she turned the head of her horse in the direction of home and bounded rapidly over the smooth green prairie. Once, when at a distance from the place of their interview, she looked back, and seeing Elwood still standing on the same spot, she beckoned to him to conceal himself, and then pursued her way homeward.

Had she asked herself with what object she proposed to conduct him to the cavern, she would have answered, "to save the life of an injured, persecuted fellow being."

Beyond the present moment she hardly extended a thought. Every faculty of her mind was concentrated upon the single idea that the life of the Outlaw, depended solely upon her. Fortunately for Catharine, on her return home, Major Clifton was employed in his library, and contrary to his usual custom, on that evening retired early to rest. For the first time in her life, Miss Clifton avoided the presence of her father. She shrunk even from the eyes of the servants, for it seemed to her excited imagination that they might easily read in her deep blushes, and confusion, the secret upon which her own happiness as well as the life of Elwood depended.

Weak from suffering, exhausted with overpowering emotions, the young Outlaw threw himself once more upon his grassy couch, to await the hour of night, when he should repair to the place appointed for his meeting with Catharine. But an hour since and every object around him wore the dark hue of despair. Now, all was changed. The smooth green prairie, the long line of bluffs with their towering cliffs, seemed to his enraptured fancy, glowing with the bright hues of Paradise. Never before had he beheld with so much admiration the glorious scene of sunset on the prairies. A dense mass of clouds, of the deepest crimson, hung like a curtain along the western horizon. Slowly and majestically they rose higher in the heavens, and gradually separating, assumed a thousand fantastic shapes, of castles, towers, islands, and continents. As he gazed upon this moving panorama, how ardently did he wish that these gorgeous forms were real, and that he and Catharine were the sole inhabitants of that bright region, where they could sail away off into the realms of unknown space, and live only for each other.

As the evening advanced, too impatient to wait longer, with feeble steps he bent his way to the place of meeting. Arrived at the well known spot, he listened anxiously to every sound, and gazed intently into the surrounding darkness. The outline of Maj. Clifton's mansion was dimly visible, but all its inmates had apparently retired to rest. He waited long, and a thousand fears began to torture him, when the signal light appeared at Catharine's window, and was instantly extinguished. In a few moments more, her form was seen approaching. Their meeting was silent, for both were too fearful of discovery to utter a word, even in whisper. She made a sign for him to follow her, and conducted him, nearly half a mile, to a narrow, but steep path that ascended the bluff, pausing frequently to listen. The ascent was toilsome, and the Outlaw was more than once compelled to rest. They reached the spot, and with difficulty Miss Clifton discovered, in the deep obscurity that concealed it, the entrance of the cavern. In a low whisper she bade Elwood take hold of her cloak, and step cautiously. Continuing for some distance along a narrow passage, the direction of the cavern suddenly changed, and in a few minutes more, Miss Clifton, closely followed by the Outlaw, groped her way into a spacious chamber. It was the termination of their journey. Settling down a small basket which she carried on her arm, Catharine struck a light, and soon a lamp sent its dim rays into the profound darkness that reigned in this silent vault, rendering the lofty roof and the walls but faintly visible. Far remote from the living world, at the solemn hour of midnight, the scene around them was impressive, and well calculated to inspire emotions of awe. It was not till then that Miss Clifton fully realized how completely she had placed her destiny in the hands of a stranger who was regarded as a robber and a murderer, and